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AUTHOR Burgess, Ann Wolbert
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ABSTRACT

This document describes a study of runaways (N=149) at a Toronto, Canada shelter which examined why urban adolescents run away from home; the role of sexual abuse in the life histories of runaways; and why runaways return home. The report begins with a discussion about adolescents at risk, with a definition of terms, numbers of runaways, and a new look at runaway youth. The second chapter describes major study findings about the adolescents examined, including life at home, abuse history, and an overall profile. A case study is included. The third chapter discusses patterns, reasons, consequences, and cycles of running. Three aspects of providing help if the cycle of running is to be broken and the youth directed toward achievement are discussed: (1) intervention considerations; (2) levels of intervention for short-term programs; and (3) the use of drawings as an interview and assessment technique. Creating a positive future for the runaway is the topic of the fifth chapter, which focuses on understanding the problem, public recognition of the problem, reorganizing agency relationships, and research and program evaluation. The final chapter provides advice to parents whose children have run away and advises all parents to be prepared. (ABL)

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NATIONAL CENTER FOR MISSING & EXPLOITED CHILDREN™

# Youth at Risk

## Understanding Runaway and Exploited Youth

In cooperation with

*School of Nursing*
*University of Pennsylvania*

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A toll-free telephone line is open for those who have information that could lead to the location and recovery of a missing child: **1-800-843-5678.** (Washington, D.C., residents will call a local number: **634-9836.**) The TDD hotline (for the deaf) is **1-800-826-7653.** The 15 toll-free hotlines cover Canada as well as the United States.

A number of publications, listed here, are available by writing the National Center at the address below.

- ☐ *Parental Kidnapping*—a handbook for parents
- ☐ *Selected State Legislation*—state laws to protect children
- ☐ *Summary of Selected State Legislation*—a summary of the above
- ☐ *Investigator's Guide to Missing Child Cases*—a handbook for law-enforcement officers locating missing children
- ☐ *Child Molesters: A Behavioral Analysis*—a handbook for law-enforcement officers investigating cases of child sexual exploitation and abuse
- ☐ *Child Protection Priorities in State Legislation*—seven legislative priorities to prevent child victimization
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**National Center for Missing and Exploited Children**
1835 K Street, N.W., Suite 700, Washington, D.C. 20006

# Youth at Risk

## Understanding Runaway and Exploited Youth

September 1986

**Ann Wolbert Burgess,** R.N., D.N.Sc.
van Ameringen Professor of Psychiatric Mental Health Nursing
**University of Pennsylvania School of Nursing**
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

**National Center for Missing & Exploited Children**

## Research Project Staff

**Ann W. Burgess,** R.N., D.N.Sc.
van Ameringen Professor of Psychiatric Mental Health Nursing
University of Pennsylvania School of Nursing
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

**Marieanne L. Clark,** M.S.
Editor, Department of Health and Hospitals
Boston, Massachusetts

**Peter Gaccione,** M.A.
Computer Programer, Department of Health and Hospitals
Boston, Massachusetts

**Carol R. Hartman,** R.N., D.N.Sc.
Associate Professor and Coordinator of Graduate Program in Psychiatric Mental Health Nursing
Boston College School of Nursing
Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts

**Mark-David Janus,** C.S.P.
Chaplain, St. Thomas Aquinas University Center
University of Connecticut
Storrs, Connecticut

**Arlene McCormack,** Ph.D.
Assistant Professor of Sociology
University of Lowell
Lowell, Massachusetts

**Karen Woelfel**
Editorial Assistant, Department of Health and Hospitals
Boston, Massachusetts

**Judith Wood Howe,** M.S., A.T.R.
Director, Therapeutic Arts Program, Department of Psychiatry
The Children's Hospital
Boston, Massachusetts

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National Network of Runaway and Youth Services

Robert O. Heck
Program Manager
Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention
U.S. Department of Justice

John B. Rabun, Jr.
Deputy Director, Technical Assistance
National Center for Missing and Exploited Children

Michelle P. Spring
Publications Specialist
National Center for Missing and Exploited Children

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Complete study findings will be published in *Running for Their Lives: Youth in Turmoil*, by Mark-David Janus, Arlene McCormack, Ann W. Burgess, and Carol R. Hartman (Lexington, Massachusetts: Lexington Books, 1987).

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# Foreword

Growing public awareness of the issue of victimization has been accompanied by increases in both the reporting and estimates of sexual abuse. A poll in the *Los Angeles Times* (August 25, 1985) reported that 27 percent of the women and 16 percent of the men questioned said that they had been sexually molested as children. Compared to the general population, much higher rates of childhood sexual abuse are noted in studies of specific populations—in particular, runaways. In light of a strong nationwide concern for sexually exploited children, a team of researchers set about to study the impact of sexual victimization in a runaway population as one way to advance the understanding of the causes and consequences of runaway behavior.

Furthermore, the cycle of violence (*see* Appendix, page 39) now appears as beginning with child abuse within the family and extending to missing child episodes that present the arena for exploitation of the child. With maturation, the adult—abused as a child—often becomes the abuser or exploiter.

The study of runaway youth began with these questions:

- Why do urban adolescents run away from home?
- What is the role of sexual abuse in the life histories of runaways?
- Why do runaways return home?

Data had revealed that multiple abuses often characterize the family environments of these runaways, and an important question is what is the youth's attachment to the abusive environment.

In reviewing the data, the researchers tried to explore the nature of the runaway's reaction to the abusive environment rather than simply to categorize the runaway as a "loser." The actual data indicate that runaways are often avoidant, resisters, confused in their thinking, believe control is in the hands of others, and are unwilling and unable to accomodate unrealistic and rigid family expectations.

The parents of many of the youths studied hold unreasonably high expectations of their children—behavior that often has its origins in the parents' own personal frustrations.

To remain optimistic about the future of our nation's youth, we must confront the many reasons underlying runaway behavior. The answer seems straightforward: There are often inadequacies in the home, the school, and the community. The youth must still be held accountable, however. But the difficult question remains: How do we develop reasonable accountability in both?

This book will be of interest to a wide range of professionals as well as parents. Concerned citizens and community leaders will find Chapter 1 helpful in identifying and understanding the problem of runaways. Social scientists and researchers will be interested in the background and profile of the runaway population described in Chapter 2. Chapter 3, which describes the causes of runaway behavior, will be valuable to parents, as will Chapter 6, which contains guidelines on what to do if your child runs away. Front-line responders—law-enforcement, school authorities, probation officers, juvenile workers, child protective agencies, shelter staff, social workers, nurses, and physicians—will find useful information about intervention techniques in Chapter 4. Finally, educators, judges, attorneys, legislators, and policy makers will find that Chapter 5 poses some challenging suggestions for reform.

*Youth at Risk* represents one of many materials produced and published by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children that illustrates the strong link between missing and exploited children. As many research studies have proved, the status itself of being *missing* (runaway, homeless, abducted, etc.) is a very large window for entrance into child sexual exploitation. What the study of Dr. Ann Burgess shows is that physical and sexual abuse in the home is one of the primary reasons youths give for running away.

The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children operates under a dual mandate from the U.S. Congress: to decrease the incidence of crimes against children, and to assist law-enforcement in handling these difficult cases when they do occur. To this end, the National Center provides technical assistance, education and prevention programs, and publications to parents, law-enforcement, social service workers, educators, and many other professionals. With *Youth at Risk*, the National Center has taken the sound, thorough research of Dr. Ann Burgess and others and made it available to parents and the entire practitioner community.

Robbie Callaway
Director, Government/United Way Relations
Boys Clubs of America

# A Message to the Reader

In *Youth at Risk: Understanding Runaway and Exploited Youth*, Dr. Burgess and her associates have given us a valuable picture of runaway youth and many helpful suggestions for appropriate community and programmatic response.

The study of runaways in this book was made in Toronto, Canada, at a shelter that works with young people up to the age of 21. The males studied were close to age 18 and the females close to age 17. This population contrasts with runaways of a modal age of 15 who come to shelters in the United States (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, *FY 1984 Report to Congress*).

Older runaways tend to have a longer history of severe problems and have most likely made a permanent break with their families. They need different services, such as assistance in developing independent living skills, than runaways in early adolescence, who are more likely to be in need of family therapy or placement in foster home settings.

The ethnic distribution of the Toronto youth is 81 percent white, 9 percent black, and 10 percent Native American or other groups. Programs in the United States reported in 1984 that youth served were 69 percent white, 20 percent black, 7 percent Hispanic, and 4 percent other groups (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, *FY 1984 Report to Congress*). Members of the helping professions in the United States should be well schooled in the cultural values of different ethnic groups, particularly in those traditions relating to family structure and functioning.

In the United States there is a system of over 400 crisis centers for runaway youth (273 partially funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services). Performance standards specified in administration and a great deal of dedicated training and networking among these centers has resulted in programs that have many of the characteristics recommended by Dr. Burgess in Chapter 5 of *Youth at Risk*. These programs provide a wide variety of comprehensive services, including alternative education, health and

mental health care, pre-employment skill building, substance abuse prevention, family therapy, parent effectiveness training, and counseling.

This is not to say that there are enough such programs or that all youths find their way to them. It is to stress that a number of very effective program models exist in the United States that work with runaways and are closely linked to their community services and the political processes at the local, state, and national levels.

The researchers of *Youth at Risk* note that nearly 40 percent of the target runaway population come to shelters from institutions or foster homes. These young people most likely were removed from their homes because of abuse, neglect, or delinquent activity and were placed in the custody of the state. This is a group of young people whom American providers have found to be the chronic runners, street kids, and throwaways. They have often been sexually abused at home and have found the state to be a neglectful parent who provides little effective treatment. These young runaways are eventually lost in the system—forced to steal, push drugs, and prostitute themselves. They do not attend school, are not prepared for a productive adult life, and are well on their way to becoming a drain on or danger to society.

This is the real tragedy—that these youth are never reconnected to the institutions of family, school, church, or work. These "systems kids" who are lost in bureaucratic mazes, underfunded services, and unheeding communities need to be the focus of our study and attention. Only when we comprehend our adult failures can we truly understand runaway and exploited youth.

The runaways' behavior is often a reflection of their hope that they can escape the abuse and chaos of their families or our systems of help. They truly want to take responsibility for their lives and live out their aspirations. It is this sense of determined struggle that has endeared street kids and runaways to those of us who have spent years working with them. It is terribly important that we understand that these are for the most part wonderful, brave, and potentially achieving young people. We invite the readers of this book to join us in assisting these young people whom we have learned to love.

June P. Bucy, D.H.L.
Executive Director
National Network of
Runaway and Youth Services

This drawing was made by a runaway youth who first ran at age 16 and who has run away twice, the longest time away from home being ten months. The drawing shows good use of shading and detail. The omission of the face suggests the youth's difficulty in facing the sadness she experienced, and there is an aspect of shame in the bow of the head and the placement of the hands in the pockets. The lack of feet indicates feelings of immobility.

# 1. Adolescents at Risk

*When the boy was ten, his father apprenticed him to his own business but the boy did not like it. He dreamed restlessly of the sea, and his father became aware that if something were not done quickly, the boy would follow the example of one of his elder brothers and leave suddenly. To prevent this, he tried to find some business which would suit the character and fancy of his son. Finally, he put him as apprentice with his half-brother James, who was a printer in Boston. . . . [But the boy] quarrelled with his brother and would not listen to his father, who tried to reconcile them. Finally, he left the city with a friend . . . sailed for New York and Philadelphia, arriving in the latter city in October 1723.*

Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790)
*Encyclopedia Britannica*, 1959

Ben Franklin did not leave home because of family conflict, disinterest, or maltreatment; rather, Ben's father, seeing the early signs of restlessness, tried to help and direct his son. Although this attempt was not completely successful, Ben Franklin eventually became a statesman, author, inventor, and founder of the University of Pennsylvania.

In contrast, other well-known historical figures left home because of parental cruelty or abuse. According to folklore, as a boy David ("Davy") Crockett (1786-1836) could never please his father. By age 13, the youth felt that he was too old to be beaten. One morning the cow he was milking kicked over the pail and Davy, knowing the outcome, ran away. When he finally returned home, his father beat him without mercy. As a result, Davy left home, never to return. He learned to survive in the wilderness of Kentucky and Tennessee, and as an adult was known as a frontiersman, patriot, and Member of Congress [1]. (Numbers in brackets refer to the references listed on pages 37-38.)

These historical accounts of youths leaving home remind us that running away is not a new phenomenon. We have cited two cases of runaways who later went on to great success. It appears today, however, that an increasing number of youths shatter their lives by running away. Recent accounts of children and youths living on the streets have aroused public concern. Involvement of runaways in street crime, drug and alcohol abuse, child prostitu-

tion and pornography, murder, and even suicide has challenged what we really know about and how we deal with adolescent runaway behavior in the twentieth century.

Contemporary United States studies, including our study of runaways in Canada, have found that in addition to the "typical" runaway being adventurous, rebellious, and stubborn, the adolescent is often a victim of a troubled family environment and of multiple abuses. The youth is without employment skills or plans, and by the act of running away becomes vulnerable to the dangers of survival in the unprotected environment of the street. The runaway, denied the opportunity to live in a safe and stable environment, is a youth at risk of physical and emotional injury, of sexual and other criminal exploitation—and even death.

This chapter describes the problem of runaway youth: how many run away, how we regard runaways, how our perceptions have influenced policy decisions, how society responds to runaways, and how failures in our system's responses affect the runaway.

## Definitions of Terms

It is useful to consider missing children in terms of four major categories: 1) runaways, 2) stranger or acquaintance abductions, 3) parental kidnappings, and 4) lost or accidentally injured children [2].

In general, when a child is not where he or she is supposed to be, that child is labeled *missing*. To be labeled missing, however, means that someone cares enough about the child to report the incident. When more about the child's whereabouts is learned, he or she may be considered in one of the following categories. (*See also* Appendix, page 41.)

**Runaways** *Runaway children* make up the largest category of missing children. Sometimes called "voluntary missings," runaways are usually defined as those who have left their parents or other caretakers without permission. Although their departure may appear voluntary, not all runaways wish to leave their homes. Instead, they may feel they are being pushed out because they are troublesome or unemployed. Adolescents who are forced out of their homes or ignored by their families and who find their way to the streets are often called *throwaway children*. Children who are allowed to come and go as they please also fall into this category.

**Abducted Children** *Abducted children* may be taken by either a family member or by a person who is not part of the child's family. Circumstances of family member abduction—often called *parental kidnapping*—include a divorced or separated parent's failing to return a child to the child's guardian or taking the child without the knowledge or permission of the child's guardian. *Children abducted by non-family members* (sometimes called "stranger abductions") are also taken without the knowledge or permission of the child's caretaker.

**Homeless Youth** Runaways, throwaways, or abducted youth eventually may become *homeless*, although the term generally applies to the runaway group. It implies that either the family has abandoned the youth completely or the youth has voluntarily exiled himself or herself from the family group.

**Lost or Accidentally Injured Children** This category refers to those situations in which, for example, a child wanders into the woods, becomes injured or trapped, and is unable to contact others for help. The child's intention was not to run away; rather, the situation occurred in the context of daily childhood activities.

## How Many Runaways?

It is difficult to determine with certainty the number of young people who run away. One reason is that there are different ways of defining runaways, which results in reporting methods that vary with the definition used. In addition, there is a scarcity of information about runaways who are not reported missing by their families or who do not use any of the resources for runaways, such as shelters. Furthermore, there are different ways of counting runaways who return home soon after leaving or who run away repeatedly. For example, one child who has run away three times in one year may be counted as three runaway children instead of three runaway incidents of one youth. These problems point out the need for a national, uniform, centralized system for collecting information about runaways.

Nevertheless, researchers and government agencies have attempted to estimate the number of runaway youths to determine the incidence of runaway and missing children. Runaway rates range from 1.7 percent to 2.06 percent for youths between 10 and 17 years old [3, 4]. This rate represents a range of 700,000 to almost 1 million runaways per year. Researchers have estimated that 9 to 10 percent of American youth between the ages of 12 and 17 run away from home at least once [5, 6]. Studies indicate that approximately 3 percent of American families produce a runaway within a given year, and 12 percent of all American youth have run away at least once before age 18 [7].

As might be expected, certain areas have a higher runaway population than others. Some regions may experience what has been called a significant "immigration" of runaways [7]. For example, it was estimated by the *Children's Defense Fund Reports* that New York City has 20,000 to 30,000 runaway youths wandering the streets [8]. Other large cities may be less well known within the network of runaway youth and thus may have a lower population of runaways.

Although early studies identified running away as more common for females than males, this is not necessarily so. Because of a stronger social stigma against runaway behavior in females, preteen and adolescent females are more likely to be arrested for this status offense [9, 10]. (A *status offense* is a violation that is a "crime" for a youth but would not be for an adult.) Thus, females may be more likely to be counted as runaways.

## The Runaway's Public Image

Youths who leave home rarely relate their experiences and are seldom viewed by the general public as vulnerable. Labeling runaways as "failures" or "bad kids" shifts attention away from what the child is trying to escape—home life. By dismissing the runaway's behavior as delinquent, we fail to consider what the act of running away tells us about personal conflicts or a poor family environment. The attitude that the runaway is "out of step" with his or her environment contributes to the runaway's feelings of being different and of being alienated, not only from the family but also from friends and peers. And, sadly, the runaway is often forced to reconstruct a pseudo-family on the street.

There are three main views of why youths run away. One view is that the adolescent has problems and runs away because of difficulties facing them. Another view sees families as responsible for failing to include the child into a normal family life. A third view suggests that maltreatment of the youth by parents or caretakers is at the root of the problem. Recent studies indicate that child abuse—both physical and sexual—may play a large part in triggering a youth to run away.

This drawing was made by a youth who first ran when he was 17 and his parents were divorcing. The oldest of two boys, he has run five times and has been away from home for three years. He reports physical beatings by both parents and sexual abuse by his father. His reason for leaving was that his mother was a chronic alcoholic and his parents abused him. The youth's drawing avoids reference to the body, the subject of abuse. There is careful attention to the details of the face, however, and the drawing may attempt to illustrate a desire for honesty and integrity through an image of Abraham Lincoln.

## Running Away and Exploitation

After adolescents run away, they are highly susceptible to exploitation. For example, one study of runaway youths found that 19 percent of boys and 23 percent of the girls were involved in prostitution after running away [11]. Furthermore, data developed on 830 missing children by the Exploited and Missing Child Unit in Louisville, Kentucky, indicated that approximately 10 percent of the missing child population was exploited while missing. Data further indicated that up to 85 percent of the commercially exploited children were missing at the time of the exploitation offense [12].

Clearly, runaways are often the victims of some sort of abuse and, behind their defensive demeanor, many of them are frightened. Although they have positive potential as members of society, they do not feel important to their families and are not valued by family members or by society. Many of them have been kicked out, forced out, or never allowed into the spotlight of the family or the community.

Running away exacts a high price on the adolescent. Life on the street frequently means learning tactics, often criminal, for survival. This perpetrates further the public's image of the runaway as an outcast of society rather than as a member of a troubled family.

## The System's Response to Runaway Youth

**Runaway Shelters** To provide runaways with a safe haven, communities and agencies have established shelters, halfway houses, and crisis centers throughout the country. Some runaways—lonely, terrified, and hungry—come to these places of their own accord, while others are left there by police to await return to their homes or placement elsewhere. Nevertheless, the so-called freedom of life on the streets still has a powerful attraction for many runaways. Some choose not to use the crisis centers at all and instead stay with friends or literally live on the streets. In addition, many runaways who do use or who are placed in shelters run from these havens, despite the risks of living on the streets. In fact, one study found that only about 5 percent of the runaways studied used runaway shelters at all [13].

Runaways as a group present critical questions for social service agencies that provide them with food and shelter. Many agencies adhere to conventional policies of returning runaways to their homes. This approach, however, simply allows the chronic runaway to continue in the cycle of leaving home. Many runaways avoid or leave the various agencies set up to keep them. When the runaway's reasons for leaving home are not adequately addressed, the running continues. Although many local communities do attempt to help runaways with their problems, a lack of resources may affect these programs.

**Law-Enforcement** Law-enforcement personnel also experience obstacles in dealing with runaway youth. Because a runaway cannot be detained, the police officer who brings a runaway to a shelter may, within a few hours, see the same runaway out on the street again. In addition, many police departments may place runaways low on their list of priorities, particularly in view of the fact that many youths reported as missing or runaway return home of their own accord within a relatively brief period of time.

**Health and Mental Health** Runaways often turn to health clinics and emergency rooms for medical attention. Nurses and physicians, in attending to immediate health concerns, may not be able to inquire about the safety of the youth's living environment. Mental health professionals, who may detect a history of running away during an intake evaluation, may not always connect the running behavior with the youth's psychological problems.

In short, our service system's response to dealing with runaways has shortcomings—partly because of agency priorities, difficulties in addressing the causes of runaway behavior, or the complications of working with other disciplines to intervene effectively with the family and the community. As a result, this behavior continues, with the runaway youth continually at risk of exploitation through sexual and other criminal activity, vulnerable to involvement in substance abuse, and subject to the many hardships of life on the run.

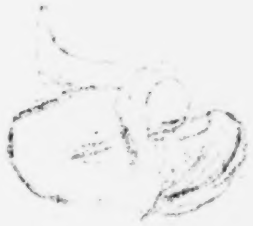
## A New Look at Runaway Youth

Motivated by the continued debate about the nature and consequences of running away, the authors undertook a study of runaways that focuses on the nature of the experience as described by the runaways themselves. Did youths run away to avoid and resist a family situation or as a last resort and solution to a problem?

During the summer of 1984, a total of 149 runaways between the ages of 15 and 20 in a crisis center in a major urban area (Toronto, Canada) were interviewed. The center provides temporary emergency shelter to approximately 500 runaways per month. A comparison of the study's participants with the shelter's overall runaway population in terms of age, race, education, gender, and religion indicated that the participants were representative of the adolescents using the center. *Note: Because the study examined a small, non-random group of runaways, caution should be used in generalizing its findings to the general runaway population.*

Adolescents averaged seven nights at the shelter. With a formulated plan of care, they may stay longer. Staff counselors, specially trained for the study, asked the voluntary, anonymous participants specific questions about themselves, their families, and their experiences in running away. Questions relating to ongoing delinquent activities could not be asked; also, detailed information about the nature and frequency of sexual abuse and the runaway's relationship to the abuser could not be obtained due to clinical and ethical restraints.

The results of the study, which form the basis for the remainder of this book, provide new and confirmatory information about adolescents who have run away. In particular, the drawings made by the runaways upon request highlight the impact that the runaway incident had on the youths. These drawings, in combination with background information, illustrate that the cycle of running is in itself a highly traumatizing experience. (*See* the drawings and their analysis throughout the book.)



A 17-year-old Native American, running for the first time and away from home for three days, drew a tiny, unclothed female figure hiding her head on her knees, suggesting depression and shame.

# 2. Background and Life Situation of the Runaway

Who are the youths who leave their homes and flee their families for a life on the streets? This chapter, based on information from the study of 149 runaways in Canada, provides us with a snapshot of the runaway: his or her personality, self-perceptions, background, family, and home life (*see also* Table 1, page 13).

## Profile of the Group Studied

Of the runaways studied, 63 percent are males and 37 percent are females. Their ages range from 15 to 20, with the males closest to age 18 and the females slightly younger, at 17 years old. The majority are white, with blacks accounting for 9 percent, and runaways of other groups (*i.e.*, Native American) making up the remaining 10 percent.

Several of the runaways have already become young parents. Of the male runaways, almost one quarter report having fathered children, while nearly one third of the female adolescents have been pregnant.

Just over half the youths studied have at least some high school education, yet few (only 15 percent) have graduated from high school. Most are no longer attending school.

Many of the runaways (about 8 in 10) have trouble in school or at work. More than half have been suspended or expelled from school; other school-related problems include skipping school, not paying attention, not finishing schoolwork, and disrupting school activities. Despite these problems, most of the runaways (87 percent) say that at one time they believed they could be successful in school. In sharp contrast to their school performance is the runaways' sense of personal competency, with most seeing themselves as intelligent and excelling at the usual adolescent interests (reading, music, and drawing). Only one fifth claim they are "dumb at most things."

**Self-Perception** The majority of the runaways see themselves as trustworthy, easygoing, and strong. They seem to be content with the way they are, and less than half wish that they were different. They are confident in their physical appearance. Not only do the runaways think well of themselves, but they imagine that others—friends and classmates—also think highly of them.

In terms of their emotional outlook, however, the runaways feel an overall unhappiness with their lives. They admit to worrying frequently, feeling nervous, and losing their temper easily. Slightly fewer than half report feeling sad, and about one third claim that they are

unhappy, cry easily, and are often afraid. The runaways also report behavior problems. Over half admit to being troublesome and disobedient at home and school.

Finally, the youths reveal a contradiction in their sense of personal importance. While almost three fourths of the runaways say they will achieve much when they grow up, a majority also claim that they now are neither important to their families nor to their schoolmates. Perhaps most significant is that over three quarters of the youths feel "different" from most people.

**Families of Runaways** At the time of their latest instance of running away, 6 in 10 runaways were living with their families; the remaining runaway youths were living in institutions or foster homes. Few of the runaways' families can be considered intact. Parental divorce or breakup has disrupted the families of over two thirds of the runaways. In slightly less than half the families, one or both parents have remarried after divorce.

Although it may not be the case for all urban runaways, most runaways in this study come from financially stable families. Of those who provided estimates of family income, 8 in 10 report incomes about the same as or higher than most family incomes.

Almost half the families are supported by two working parents (nearly the same percentage that reported family incomes higher than average). Only 3 in 10 youths belong to families supported by fathers only; fewer than 2 in 10 runaways have mothers who alone provide the family with income. A very small number of runaways come from families who exist on some form of welfare. (These statistics, of course, reflect the kinds of youths who use runaway shelters, not the actual runaway population itself.)

Religion, a stabilizing and uniting force in many families, does not appear to play a significant role in the families of runaway youths. Sixty percent of the runaways studied claim that religion is of limited or no importance to their families, and it is no surprise that half the youths report that they have no personal religious affiliation.

## Life at Home

Constant conflict characterizes the family relationships of the runaway. Almost all the runaways studied have had a serious argument with one or both parents, and 9 in 10 of these youths report that within the family as a whole there are serious disagreements. (The element of conflict in these families goes beyond the home environment, moreover; in one third of the families someone has recently appeared in court or has been arrested for a serious violation.) There is little open expression of caring and support. Instead, anger, aggression, and conflict prevail.

The runaways have serious negative feelings about their families. Nearly two thirds of the youths report harassment from the family. Fifty percent report verbal abuse at home. In addition, the runaways do not see family life as happy. Only 6 in 10 youths are able to recall their families being happy for more than three days at a time.

The runaways claim that their families expect too much of them, and 7 in 10 youths believe they have disappointed their families. The runaways have been given neither the skills nor the independence necessary to meet high expectations, however. Family rules and regulations are rigid, and there is little or no planning or sharing of family activities and responsibilities. Interests in political, intellectual, or cultural activities are not strong; ethical and religious values are not emphasized. The runaways' family members are less likely to be self-sufficient, self-confident, or decisive than are family members of other youths.

## Abuse History

One of the major findings in the lives of the runaways studied is their history of *abuse*—verbal, physical, and sexual. An overwhelming majority of the runaways have been physically beaten (73 percent), and 4 in 10 have endured these beatings in the home. In addition, 7 in 10 female and nearly 4 in 10 male runaways report having been sexually abused. (*Sexual abuse* is defined here as the adolescent 1) having sex against his or her will, 2) having been sexually molested, or 3) having been forced to view sexual activity, as in pornographic films.) Because it is not verified whether most of the sexual abuse occurs prior to the running away, physical abuse remains the primary indicator of abuse in the homes of runaways. It is suspected, however, that many of the females studied suffered sexual abuse in the home.

**Consequences of Abuse** As might be expected, an abusive environment leaves a strong imprint on the runaways themselves. Sexually abused males and females are more likely to report anxiety and suicidal feelings than are their non-abused counterparts. Sexually abused female runaways are more likely than non-abused female runaways to participate in delinquent or criminal behavior, to feel confused about sex, and to express anger in their relationships with others. Male runaways with sexual abuse in their backgrounds have more trouble with social contacts, are more fearful of adult men, have more problems in their relationships with other males, and have more physical complaints than non-abused male runaways.

Runaways who were physically abused were more likely than non-abused males to cite the abuse as an important reason for running away. They also were more likely to report sexual abuse either before or after leaving home and were more likely to report feeling afraid of having sex.

Runaways who perceive their family incomes as being the same or lower than most were more likely to report physical abuse in the home than were those who perceive their family incomes as higher than most. Runaways from both intact and reconstituted (stepparent) families were more likely to report physical abuse than were runaways from single-parent families, especially if the families were under financial stress.

Physically abused runaways were more likely to engage in physical and verbal fights with peers than were those not physically abused. They were also more likely to report withdrawal from friends and to appear "haunted" by their strong feelings about their running episode. Physically abused runaways also indicated a general dissatisfaction with life and a longing for things to be different. They were more likely to display general emotional disturbance and a depressed mood. Those physically abused reported headaches, sleep problems, and flashbacks. They reported feeling lonely, fear of being alone, fear of going outside, fear of mental illness, and thoughts of suicide.

## The Overall Profile

The emerging profile of the runaway is one of a youth whose self-perceptions do not match the realities of life. The runaways see their overall qualities as positive, yet they do poorly in school, have trouble with authorities, and fight with peers. Many runaways come from broken homes. Although most of their families are stable financially, family life is stressful and unhappy, and children are given little support, time, or attention. Anger, conflict, and dissatisfaction are at the root of the family relationships. In addition, the home life of many

This drawing was made by a youth who first ran at age 4 and has run 110 times. The line quality of the drawing is disorganized, and there is gender confusion. The artwork has an impulsive quality in addition to evidence of having been reworked several times. Aggression is apparent in the strong lines about the face and body and in the prominent teeth and eyes. The adolescent's case history reveals sexual abuse by her father, who blamed her for the abuse.

of the youths is marred by verbal, physical, and sexual abuse. The youths report feeling anxious, depressed, and "different" from others, yet they maintain their hopes of someday achieving success. Sadly, they feel betrayed by their families and thus remain isolated from other people.

## A Case History

Although each runaway is unique, Paul (not his real name) shares characteristics common to many runaways. Now 16 years old, Paul grew up in a reconstituted family (his mother divorced and remarried when Paul was 6 years old). Both his mother and stepfather have steady jobs. Paul's relationship with his parents is poor; he says his stepfather is very cold, and his relationship with his mother is distant and full of conflicts.

At the age of 7, Paul was physically beaten by his stepfather. During an argument at the dinner table, the boy was picked up by his hair, called demeaning names, and thrown onto the stairs. Physical confrontations continued during Paul's preteen years, preventing any feeling of closeness from developing between Paul and his stepfather.

During childhood, Paul showed physical and emotional signs of distress. He experienced headaches, sleep problems, nightmares, and shyness. Paul lied, fantasized, daydreamed; furthermore, he felt lonely, depressed, anxious, and afraid of adult men. At age 13 he began to use and deal drugs. His performance in school was poor.

Paul's mother and father were strict, and family life was run according to authoritarian rules. His parents were adamant about Paul's goals in life, and the arguments between the youth and his parents often involved these high expectations. Indeed, it was after just such an argument that Paul first ran away from home.

Paul describes himself as intelligent, popular, spontaneous, and trustworthy. At the same time, however, he reports feeling as if his life is a failure.

*Table 1*

### Major Study Findings

| |
|---|
| Runaways report high rates of physical, verbal, and sexual abuse in the family. |
| Family economic stress is correlated with abuse. Intact and reconstituted (stepparent) families present greater risks for abuse than economically secure single-parent families. |
| Family environments of abused runaways have high rates of anger and aggression and lack of support, and they are characterized by high expectations and rigid rules. |
| Symptoms displayed by runaway youths can be viewed as stress responses to abusive environments. Three specific reactions were identified:<br>1. Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) was evident in physically abused runaways (compared with non-abused runaway youths). Symptoms include recurrent and intrusive thoughts about the runaway incident; feelings of estrangement from the environment and other people; fear of venturing outside; hyperarousal, including sleep pattern disturbance; difficulty with memory and concentration; and avoidance of the usual adolescent activities.<br>2. Sexually abused females (compared with non-abused females) are more likely to be confused about sex and to engage in delinquent or criminal acts. Sexually abused males are more likely to report physical complaints, to fear adult men, to withdraw, and to conflict with authority.<br>3. Both male and female sexually abused runaways are more likely to report anxiety and suicidal feelings than non-abused runaways. |

The youth who drew this first ran away at age 12, has run five times, and has been away from home for two years. During the interview, he was curious about what was done with the pictures and said that he liked to express himself through his drawings. His aggression is obvious in the sharp edges and points in the drawing, and there is a suggestion of the fusion of sexuality with aggression.

# 3. Causes of Running

Youths entering their adolescent years face many transitions. Physical changes occur in conjunction with a striving for personal identity and autonomy. In the runaway, however, attempts to gain independence in a mature, self-sufficient manner fail.

Despite the many reasons runaways give for leaving home, runaway youth often return home, only to run away again. This cycle is puzzling, particularly in those instances in which a youth left home because of abuse. Why does this cycle continue? This chapter explores the causes of running: 1) why and how youths run away, 2) how many times they run away, 3) why they leave and return again to their families, 4) where they go when they run away, and 5) what happens to them after they have left home (*see also* Table 2, page 19). The overall pattern of the youths' runaway behavior can be described as the paths and patterns of runaway youths [14]. (*See also* Appendix, page 43.)

## Patterns of Running

The number of times a youth leaves home is important. The runaways studied have left home anywhere from 1 to 110 times. Four in ten of them have run away more than three times.

The median age for the cycle of running is 14 years old for this group. As many as one fourth of the runaways report first running away before the age of 12; one youth reported a first runaway experience at age 4. Most youths are into their teens when they first leave, however; nearly 4 in 10 youths first leave home in early adolescence (between ages 13 and 15), with approximately the same number leaving home at age 16 or older.

Most youths remain away from home between one month and one year. Females tend to return home sooner than males: 4 in 10 females return home in less than one month, compared with 2 in 10 males. More adolescent males (3 in 10) than females (2 in 10) stay away for over one year. Not surprisingly, it is the older youths who stay away from home the longest.

## Reasons for Running

When asked to rank in order of importance the reasons for running, runaways reported the following:

- An unhappy life (5 in 10)
- Verbal abuse (5 in 10)
- Physical abuse (4 in 10)

Other reasons were identified as important and include the following:

- Impulsive motivation ("I was tired of living a stereotyped way of life.")
- Drugs
- Alcohol
- Search for a new experience
- Need for independence
- Fighting
- Struggles over rules
- Alienation ("I did not feel a part of the family.")
- Forced out of the home
- Peer difficulties

Overall, runaways who report physical or sexual abuse as reasons for running first leave home at an early age. In addition, preteen runaways, both male and female, are more likely to report physical abuse than the older runaways.

There is a relationship between the youths' reasons for leaving and the number of times they have run away. Youths who have run away only once or twice are more likely to claim that they wanted a new experience than are adolescents who have run away a number of times. Runaways who have left home more than nine times are more likely to implicate alcohol as a very important reason for running away. These youths are also more likely than first-time runaways and youths who have left home fewer than nine times to claim physical abuse as a very important reason for running away. The runaways' responses suggest that almost all runaways leave home because of family situations they find unbearable.

### Where to Run?

Runaway youths run to or from four settings: 1) the family, 2) the institution, 3) the street, and 4) the shelter. The family is defined as either the youth's original family or a reconstituted (stepparent) family. Institutions are home facilities, such as foster or group homes, and may include legal or health facilities (juvenile halls, mental institutions, correctional facilities, or jails). The open environment of the street is unprotected and exploitive and includes subways, abandoned buildings, and other living areas. The shelter is a protective, temporary arrangement that provides food, a place to sleep, and some form of companionship. Shelter may be provided by a friend, church group, or human service organization.

Youths run away primarily from their homes, and 6 in 10 of them run away from home to seek other shelter. Once the family is left behind, a secondary launching point for runaway behavior is an institution or shelter; nearly 4 in 10 youths run to a shelter from a foster home, group home, or juvenile hall.

### Consequences of Running

What happens to youths after they run away? Some runaways return home and are able to resolve their differences and adapt to their situations at home, at work, or at school. The runaways who remain on the street, however, are subject to predators and exploiters—pimps, drug pushers, and other criminals. Abusive and exploitive adults prey on the adolescents' need to survive and may use offers of food and shelter to lure runaway youths into sex rings, pornography, drug abuse, and abusive relationships [15].

The more time runaways spend away from home and on the street, the more susceptible they are to exploitation and involvement in criminal behavior. Youths who are away from home for over a year are more likely to be arrested or to participate in physical violence.

### The Cycle of Running

The reasons for repetitive running are complex and depend on how runaway youths perceive themselves and the events around them. Many have confused perceptions: They think that other people (such as their parents) control what happens and that events are unpredictable. The runaways blame both the family and themselves for everything that happens.

Many runaways also believe that "things should be different." The youths feel that their parents should change and that they themselves should be able to change the way they are. If such changes are not forthcoming, they are severely disappointed. The runaways continue to hope that their situations will improve and, when they do not improve, they run.

The runaway returns to the abusive or otherwise difficult home life when he or she has no other course of action. Furthermore, during the time spent away from the stressful and confusing environment of the home, the runaway may forget or may question how unhappy the home environment really was. This is especially true if the runaway has been confronted with some type of difficulty at the shelter or on the streets. Home may provide money, food, companionship, and a temporary place to sleep.

The runaway returning to an abusive situation may do so for yet another reason. Abusers often manipulate their victims in such a way that the victims feel responsible for the abuse. As a result, the victims may believe that because they caused the abuse to occur, then they also will be able to keep the abuse from recurring. Thus, the youngsters return home, only to be abused again.

The family also becomes caught up in the runaway cycle. Family members may be unable to cope with the youth's running away and may not support the youth's return. Consequently, the runaway's return home may only worsen existing family tensions and put the youth at increased risk of abuse.

### A Case History

Pam (not her real name) first ran away at age 10 and has left home a total of twelve times. She last ran away at age 15 and for the past two years has been living on the streets, in shelters, in group homes, or with other families. Because she "failed at independent living," Pam was back on the streets and arrived at the shelter the day before this interview.

Pam's earliest recollections, at age 5, involve Hal, a man who lived with her mother. She remembers him being the first person who physically abused her. Other abusive incidents occurred during Pam's fifth year, when she was sexually abused by her mother as she was

The physically abused youth who drew this clearly found it too anxiety-provoking to draw a human figure. During the interview, the youth stated that he enjoys being alone and that he feels "different" from others. His parents are divorced, and his father is in prison. The drawing the youth created is a macabre death figure, the Grim Reaper.

being bathed. And, until her mother's boyfriend left the family a few months later, he beat Pam two or three more times. Subsequently, there were other men in her mother's life. Pam remembers not wanting her mother to be with any of them.

After Hal, Harold, 6'4" tall and weighing 250 pounds, moved in with the family. Both Harold and her mother drank and were abusive to all family members. When Pam was 7 years old, Harold first sexually abused her. When Pam was 10 years old, her mother married Harold.

Shortly after this marriage, Pam got up one morning as if to go to school and, without mentioning anything to parents or friends, "just started walking." She tried to appear as if she had a destination and recalls being afraid of being kidnapped.

Later that evening Pam returned and climbed into her stepfather's van to sleep, knowing that he would find her the next morning when he left for work. Pam said that when she was found in the van, her mother was happy to see her and was worried that she might be hurt.

Pam continued to be sexually abused by her stepfather and beaten by both her stepfather and mother. She ran away from home eleven more times. Each time, except for the last, she returned home because "there was nowhere else." Immediately prior to Pam's leaving home for the last time, her 2-month-old sister was removed from the home by authorities because of parental neglect.

At age 12, Pam first became involved in prostitution during one of her runaway episodes. She says she did not need the money but wanted to get her parents' attention. Pam engaged in this behavior for the next fourteen months. During this period she also became involved with drugs and alcohol to the extent that she described herself as a "teenage alcoholic."

Pam believes her parents stopped caring about her after she ran away the second time. At the age of 15, she ran to the home of a male friend, "another losing experience." She claims that the most important reasons for her leaving were the sexual and physical abuse in the family and the drinking habits of her parents. She also maintains that this last time her parents threw her out.

According to Pam, the hardest aspects about running away are being alone and not having money. The dangers on the street include "never knowing who will knock on your door [to] harass you." Pam carries weapons for protection. She admits to shoplifting, joyriding, fighting individually and in gangs, and abusing drugs and alcohol.

Pam says that she is angry with her parents. She does not wish to have any contact with them or to return to the abusive home environment. She says that her parents do not care if she returns, and "besides, they wouldn't let me if I wanted to."

*Table 2*

**Patterns of Running**

| Reasons for Running | Beliefs About Reasons for Running | Outcomes of Running |
|---|---|---|
| Unhappy life<br>Physical/verbal/sexual abuse<br>Family conflict/arguments/fights<br>Rigid rules<br>Impulse<br>Alcohol/drug abuse<br>Alienation | Events are unpredictable.<br>The youths blame themselves and others.<br>Events are under the control of others.<br>The youth should be able to control and change events. | Repeated returns home, expecting family or personal changes that do not come about<br>Increased confusion and sense of personal failure<br>Increased reliance on street life |

This was drawn by an adolescent who first ran away at age 14, has run twice, and has been away from home for three years. Her drawing of only half a face suggests a split or fragmentation in her personality. During the interview the youth said, "I could draw [the rest] but it is a picture of someone with only half a face." Her case history reveals that her parents are divorced and she constantly fights with her stepfather.

# 4. Helping the Runaway

Breaking the cycle of running poses many challenges to parents as well as social service and law-enforcement professionals. The runaways' problems are frequently complex and deep seated, particularly among the youths who have been abused, and as such may require the services of various specialists and agencies.

The runaway needs help if the cycle of running is to be broken and the youth directed toward positive achievements. This chapter examines three aspects of providing that help: 1) intervention considerations, 2) levels of intervention for short-term programs, and 3) the use of drawings as an interview and assessment technique.

## Intervention Considerations

A runaway episode is generally not a short-term crisis but, rather, the result of potentially serious problems that require clinical and social intervention. Thus, three basic tasks face the runaway and those who assume the responsibility for treating the youth: assessing for possible reconciliation with the home, preparing for independent living, and maintaining health.

Because of the recent findings of high rates of physical and sexual abuse among runaways, professionals working with these youths are faced with a complex situation. They must be alert not only to the youth's more immediate, obvious problems, but also to the possibility that there may be undisclosed abuse in the youth's background. In fact, the runaway may even resist the helping efforts of concerned individuals because of untreated past abuse. Professionals need to appreciate the clinical differences between abused and non-abused runaways in order to develop an effective treatment plan and to overcome the runaway's resistance to treatment.

The family difficulties that cause a child to leave home are not simple communication problems or parent-teenager disagreements. Instead, they represent serious family distress, particularly in cases of physical and sexual abuse in the home. Simply returning runaways to such families places the youths at additional risk of abuse—from which the youth will run again and again. Professionals must assess thoroughly the family's ability and motivation to address problems, to accept the youth back into the family, or to help the youth live under alternative arrangements. These are complex issues that require long-term therapeutic attention.

The very reasons that make it difficult for a youth to remain within the family also make it difficult for the runaway to respond to outside help. First, these youths come from families that lack organization and structure and have not encouraged the youth to achieve independence. The families maintain rigid rules and procedures. Thus, it is very likely that the youths will have difficulty in adapting to the surroundings of youth shelters and group homes and will be unprepared to take part in their own treatment plan. The runaways will associate this new experience of planned treatment and structured living with the inconsistent yet rigid rules of the family they left behind. Consequently, they may show toward crisis interveners the anger and aggression they feel toward family members.

Second, the runaways often come from families lacking an ability to express concern and support. As a result, the runaway may appear secretive and untrusting. The youth will be unlikely to accept or understand the care and concern offered by the helping professional.

Third, many families have not encouraged the runaways to develop skills that would allow them to succeed on their own. Consequently, these youths may not be ready to live independently as an alternative to rejoining the family. The adolescents may not be able to hold a job, manage financial resources, or form positive relationships with other people.

Before any interventions are begun, helping professionals must consider all aspects of the youth's running experience. Runaways may require substantial evaluation before any long-term program is planned.

## Levels of Intervention

The first priority for the front-line professional—police officer, shelter or crisis center worker, social worker, nurse, or physician—who initially comes in contact with the runaway is to provide safety and meet the youth's physical needs of food, shelter, and health. The youth needs to know that the basis of this contact is only to provide immediate care and help. From this point on, appropriate consultants or agencies (such as the department of youth services or mental health) can be brought in to begin to work with the youth. Because the early involvement of helping agencies is important to any form of effective assistance, front-line personnel need to know which agencies to contact.

Once the immediate physical needs of the runaway are met, helping professionals can begin to assess the runaway's problems. One way of doing so is to use a level of intervention based on how long the runaway has been away from home.

**Level 1** This approach is aimed at the early runner who has been away from home less than one month and who has potential for being returned home. Careful assessment concerning the youth's safety in the home needs to be made, particularly if the youth is female and thus at high risk of physical and sexual abuse. Consider the fact that the preteen runaway may not disclose sexual abuse. It is necessary to take time to discover the reason for the youth's running away, the youth's choice of a stable environment, and the viewpoint of the runaway's family.

**Level 2** Level 2 meets the needs of the multiple runner who has run away several times and who has been away from home from one month to one year. This runaway is not only at high risk of having been physically abused in the home but also of having been exploited while on the streets. In addition to the Level 1 assessment, these runaways need to be evaluated for general physical and emotional health, drug and alcohol use, and predatory criminal behavior.

**Level 3** This level is aimed at the serial runaway who has been away from home for over one year. Treatment must deal with the youth's homelessness as well as with the problems that caused him or her to flee. These youths are generally older and lack satisfactory schooling and work experience. This group of runaways includes the "tough kids," the youths who carry weapons and survive on the streets by criminal means. They may be under the influence of another person, such as a pimp or a drug pusher, and thus may require special protection from these exploiters. In addition to Level 2 assessment, these youths need to be stabilized in a safe environment, encouraged to use existing skills for work, treated to decrease their tension and anxiety, detoxified for drug and alcohol abuse, and assessed for potential aggression toward themselves and others.

Because this three-level approach is based on the youth's runaway experience, one of the first steps is to determine the nature of the running episode. This assessment may not always be straightforward, as the youth may not even admit to being a runaway. The youth's talk of his or her experiences on the street will reveal how well and in what manner the youth is coping, however. Generally, the longer that runaways are away from home, the more successful they are at surviving on the street. The assessment will reveal how this survival has been attained and at what cost to the runaway.

**Long-term Program Planning** Once a safe environment is provided to the runaway, front-line responders may refer the runaway for assessment and treatment of deeper problems. Work with the family is critical for those runaways who are able to return to a safe home. Group work with the support of other youths is particularly useful in safe institutional settings. Gradually, some youths can resume basic education and job goals.

## Establishing Communication

It is difficult to establish communication with runaways because, in general, the longer they have been away from home, the more isolated and demoralized they are. The runaway experience affects their ability to trust, to remain calm, and to feel connected and committed to people and places. Helping professionals need to understand the youths' anxiety and defensiveness, especially when the runaways reveal abusive experiences. A youth may even attempt to run away from the helping environment, such as the shelter, because of the intensity of his or her feelings about recounting the abuse.

Communication with runaways is most readily established and maintained when the youths are treated in a manner that gives them a sense of control, which they struggle so hard to attain. Allowing the youth to feel non-threatened in an interview imparts the feeling that he or she can make decisions and choose what will happen. In addition, if a positive relationship does develop between the runaway and a staff member, the professional should maintain this contact, perhaps as case coordinator, throughout evaluation and treatment stages.

No matter how gently and skillfully directed, questions have great potential for arousing defensiveness in the youth. Because many runaways are inclined to blame themselves, they may interpret a searching question as an attack on their views. Stressing that the intention of the interview is to clarify what has happened is often useful in dealing with defensive reactions (*see also* Table 3, page 27). Rather than confronting the youth, more may be gained by good-naturedly going along with the attitude or using humor to deal with difficult questions. These young people recoil from direct emotion, and levity may lessen the painful recounting of past experiences.

The youth who drew this was a first-time runner at age 17 and has been away from home for one year. The drawing suggests his wish to identify with someone powerful and protective. There is anxiety in the shaky line quality of the drawing, and the absence of feet suggests immobility. The figure looks more fat than muscular, but there is a sense of power in the sheer size.

Physical and sexual abuse are not often easily acknowledged by runaways. The youths may not realize that they have been victimized; they may not know that abuse is harmful and illegal. In addition, they may not trust the questioner because of a past history of exploitation. Male adolescents in particular are reluctant to admit to being abused, as to them the abuse reflects on their masculinity. Questions about discipline, fighting, and persons living and sleeping in the home during their childhood may, in an indirect manner, uncover the possibility of abuse.

It is important to keep several points in mind when interviewing runaways. First, one single interview will not provide all the needed information. It may take many sessions over a long period of time for the runaway to open up. Second, keep an open mind. Prejudgments from the helping professionals will only shut down effective communication.

## Drawings as Assessment Tools

The use of drawings with traumatized children as a non-threatening method for developing rapport, lessening tension, and uncovering feelings has been reported by several researchers [16, 17, 18]. Expressing one's thoughts through art is one way to convey a distressing event and to prepare for healing and recovery. In this way, the artwork pulls together feelings and expression [19].

Of interest to our study was the manner in which the drawing process appeared to function as a non-threatening, tension-reducing vehicle that facilitated communication with the runaways. The indirect, task-oriented structure of the drawing exercise in many instances appeared to lessen the anxiety brought on by direct one-to-one contact with an adult—anxiety that was understandably high in troubled youths who come from very distressed family environments. Thus, while drawing, many youths spontaneously shared information about current stresses, life on the street, and past experiences with home and family that may have contributed to their decision to run.

Each youth participating in the study was asked to draw a picture of an entire person on a $8\frac{1}{2}$" by 11" white paper. The runaways were allowed to choose pencil, pen, or crayons as drawing instruments. The adolescents' comments before, during, and after drawing were recorded. Later, the drawings were analyzed in terms of gender, figure completion, line quality, color, and special indicators of sexual anxiety.

The runaways had a wide range of responses to the task. The most frequent response was avoidance: "I can't draw." Some did not believe they were being asked to draw: "What? You want me to draw?"; some balked: "I haven't drawn in years." Despite their initial resistance, however, over 86 percent of the youths agreed to the task. Many drew in solitude, and some even gave instructions to the researchers: "Don't look at me while I'm drawing." Some runaways criticized their drawings: "That is not so good"; "That looks like a monster"; "She's all out of proportion." They were interested in the analysis process and were curious about the interpretation: "Do they analyze your personality from this?" Desire for control was also expressed: "I'm going to confuse them with this one."

There was also great variance in their behavior while they drew. Some youths ignored instructions and quickly drew a stick figure, while others seemed to enjoy what they were doing and took up to an hour to complete their drawings. Some comments from the youths as they drew were particularly revealing. One youth recalled his school days: "I failed art badly in school. I always did poorly in school; school and me didn't get along." Another spoke of his family: "My brother is a cartoonist. He's got all the talent in the family." Al-

though many complained that they could not draw, with the slightest praise they added details and looked pleased with their drawings.

The drawings were found to bring out the runaways' feelings about themselves and about others. A 16-year-old youth who had run away twice and had at the time been away from home for three months drew himself playing basketball. "I like to dream a lot and fantasize about playing pro basketball," he said. Another runaway questioned the task and, when told it was to help people express themselves, the youth replied, "Then I should be using [the color] black." In another case, a runaway who first ran away at age 16, had run away eight times, and had made no family contact for the past two years drew a male figure, omitting the lower half of the body. He outlined the upper part of the body heavily, a graphic attempt at containing the figure, which suggests his need to maintain internal control. He described the figure as a "sad person" and related that he left home because his father refused to allow his girlfriend or their baby to be mentioned in his home.

Sometimes the runaway would describe spontaneously an abusive experience. One youth who was enthusiastic about drawing asked, "Is this going to tell them how weird I am?" He then told the researcher that his father had been beating him for the past twelve years. When he was 13, his father had tied him to a bed and sexually assaulted him. He had made no contact with his family for three years and had left home because his parents were "unbearable. Mother is a chronic alcoholic and abusive."

The drawing also helped troubled youths to talk about their distress. One 17-year-old youth, who first ran away at age 12, had left home five times, and had been away for two months, said, "No one can really hurt me now. I detest my father and sister. My parents told me my birth was an accident and I was an unwanted child. My sister is always treated royally and I am treated like dirt." He appeared to accept his mother in a biological sense but, when asked about his father, stated he did not have one. He had been in and out of jail since age 16 and admitted he needed to see a psychiatrist: "I've started feeling criminally inclined, and I don't want to go back to jail."

Analysis of the various aspects of the drawings revealed several interesting points. The drawings verified that many runaways are confused over gender identity and sexuality and are anxious, insecure, and lacking in energy. Many of them are also depressed. In addition, analysis of the behavioral characteristics of the drawings points to possible sexual abuse.

The large number of youths who chose to respond to the drawing request and the spontaneous comments elicited from the youths about stresses, life on the street, and past experiences with home and family support the use of these drawings by trained professionals as a way to communicate with adolescent runaways. In addition, the analysis of the runaways' drawings provides information for further treatment of these troubled youths. (*See* the drawings and their analysis throughout the text.)

*WARNING: Drawings should be analyzed only by those professionals trained to interpret artwork.*

*Table 3*

## Sample Interview Questions

**Questions When Suspecting Runaway Behavior**

*Many families fight or argue at times. In your family, what is it like?*

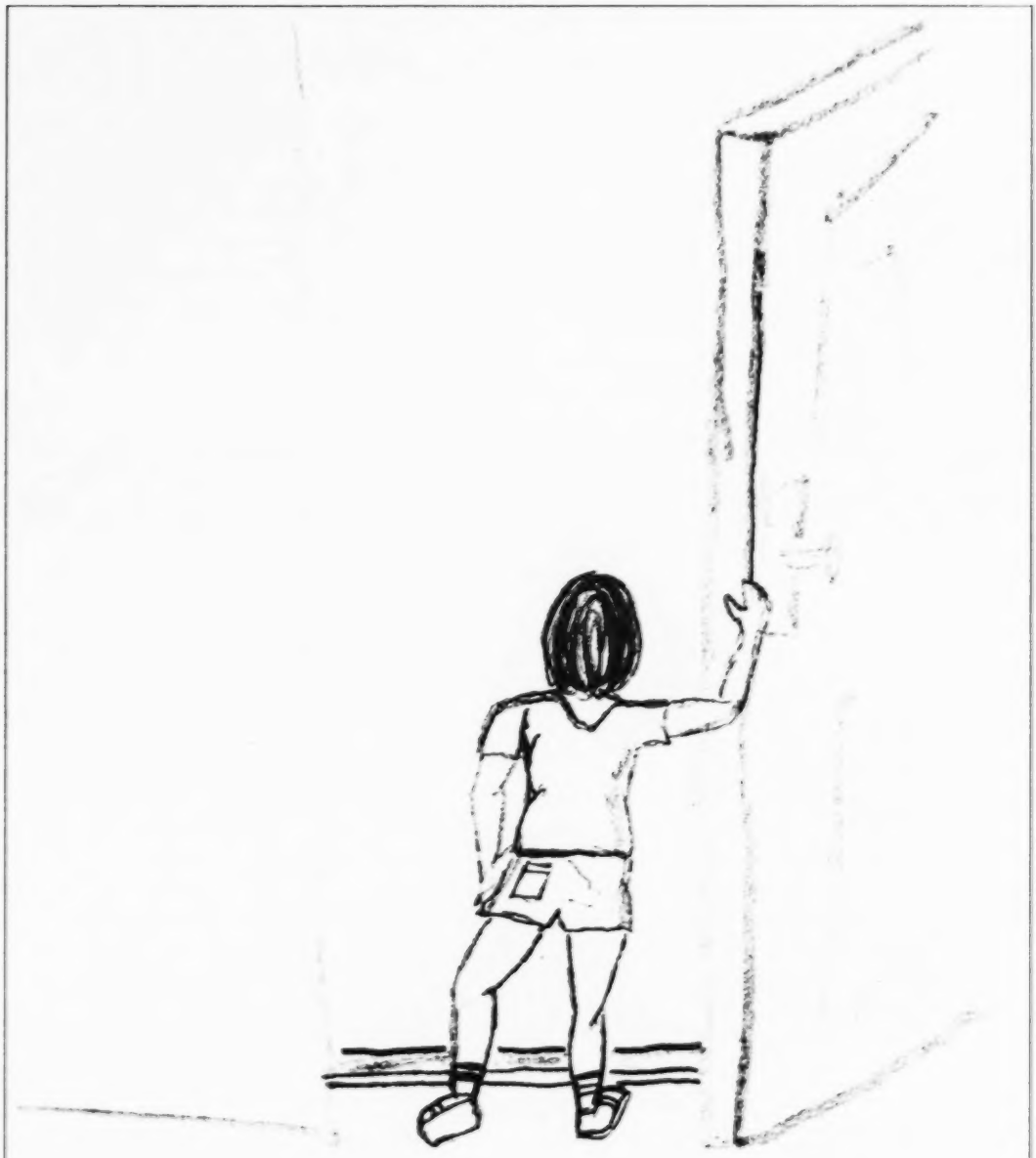
*Kids are afraid to talk about what really has happened to them. I'm wondering if you're feeling like that.*

*Sometimes kids are caught in situations they're afraid to talk about because it might get worse. Have you felt this way?*

*Sometimes parents hit (hurt or beat) their children. Has this happened to you? What was it like for you?*

**Questions When Running Away Is Disclosed**

1. *What has gone on at home that contributes to your running away?*
   Ask for number of times they have run, details of events, interactions, and relationships. Ask how discipline is handled in the home, if there is fighting, if anyone drinks, who stays and sleeps in the house and where, what is a usual good day or a bad day for the family, what TV programs are favorites and why. For example, if the youth says nagging drove him out, ask for specifics. Carefully question about physical as well as verbal and sexual abuse.
2. *Given the events or behaviors that made you run away, how much control do you or other people have over this?*
   Ask how predictable this kind of behavior is, who is responsible for the situation, how changeable are these behaviors or events.
3. *What would have to be different for you to want to stay home?*
   Ask if things have always been this way in the home and, if not, when they changed and what made them change.
4. *What would you need to make this change happen?*
5. *What would other people need to do to make this happen?*
6. *How possible are these changes?*
7. *What do you want most for yourself?*
8. *What do you think you need first to get what you want?*
9. *If you were in my place, what is the most important thing to be said or done for a youth like you?*
10. *On a scale of 0 to 10, with 10 being the highest, how useful or safe is it for you to return home? How safe is it for you on the streets compared with home?*



This was drawn by an adolescent who has run away nineteen times and has been away from home for twenty-one months. The line quality is that of a well-integrated drawing, and the case history indicates that the youth has a solidified sense of self, regardless of her physical and sexual abuse. It is unclear, however, whether the runaway's drawing is of a male or female, child or adolescent, coming out or going in. Ambivalence is a theme in her drawing.

# 5. Creating a Positive Future for the Runaway

Over the years, many of the system's responses to runaway adolescents have reflected our society's confusion about the causes and consequences of running away. The ways of dealing with runaways as status offenders have moved from such controlled, confining methods as incarceration without regard for the youth's rights to procedural methods designed to free the youth from institutional control.

Today, some people fear that juveniles who run will be drawn into a cycle of crime and that strong legal action and protective custody are needed to provide safety for the child. Others argue that the family's sanctity is at issue and that the runaway child must be returned home, regardless of the family environment. This study argues that the cycle of running away is fueled by the social system's ambivalent and incomplete response to the complex issues involved in both the runaway's and the family's crisis.

## Understanding the Problem

Helping professionals are divided in what they think is the right approach to dealing with runaways. In addition, they are very limited in resources. Thus, it is difficult to arrive at a coherent and cooperative strategy to stop the cycle of running and to create a positive future for the runaway.

Our study underscores that running is, in itself, a traumatic event. Examination of the runaways' accounts reveals the repetitive nature of their running behavior. Given these findings, how can the cycle of running be stopped?

It is clear that immediate efforts at intervention for the youth on the street and the families in crisis deserve the priority attention of existing service and legal agencies. The public health dimensions of the problem as a symptom of deeper conflicts and disturbances, however, require national attention.

Public recognition of the problem of runaway youth is essential as a first step in initiating the public policy and procedures needed to deal with the problem and assess its magnitude.

Second, it is imperative that relationships among existing service agencies be reorganized to deal more efficiently with the immediate problems of abused children and runaways on the streets.

Third, it is important that there be a commitment of public and private funding for field-initiated research evaluating intervention programs and strategies aimed at the causes

and consequences of runaway behavior. These three areas represent a starting point in creating a more positive future for runaways.

## Public Recognition of the Problem

**Advocacy for Runaways** Runaways are a neglected population of missing children and, as such, they need advocates to bring their problems to the attention of the public. In many of the serial/mass child tragedies, law-enforcement and other personnel have used the term "just runaways" in labeling the victims. Such an attitude toward a missing youth may unfortunately lead to a "non-intervention" response.

National institutes and study groups provide the detailed information necessary for reasonable planning, programing, and development of social strategies aimed at mitigating the problems associated with the phenomenon of runaway youth. Efficiency and economy of intervention efforts can be more successfully realized when the connections among runaway behavior, parental abuse, and street crime are addressed. In this context, concepts of prevention, early intervention, and rehabilitation give guidance to constructive actions.

**Public Recognition Campaign** A public recognition campaign will accomplish three major tasks: 1) by targeting those people who are unaware of the problem of runaways, it dispels stereotypes regarding the causes and consequences of running; 2) it provides a forum for concerned, knowledgeable citizens who desire guidance in addressing issues facing distressed youths and their families; and 3) it encourages the development of creative public and private financing for strategic programs of service and research.

At minimum, a public recognition campaign should address the following points:

- Runaway behavior is a public health issue.
- Runaway behavior is a symptom of family stress, disorganization, and often violent, exploitive patterns of behavior.
- Family health and the runaway's well-being are not addressed by simply returning the runaway home. Safe and, if possible, self-supporting alternatives to family life need to be established.
- A positive law-enforcement response to runaways must be encouraged.
- Front-line respondents to runaways need to make complex decisions regarding the youthful runaway, the family, and the existing social agencies that have responsibility for the runaway.
- Because of the complex factors contributing to the runaway behavior, the youth's response to aid will vary from cooperation to resentment. A public prepared to modify its immediate expectations will be more successful in engaging these youths in a positive and constructive manner.
- Legal, social, health, and voluntary services need to be made known to the public. In addition, the public needs to be aware of the scope and limitations of these services.

## Reorganizing Agency Relationships

Reorganization of relationships among existing service systems, whether public, private, or voluntary, is needed. In the last fifteen years, mathematical models of research in the social

sciences as well as in the health sciences underscore that there is not a simple cause-and-effect relationship between life events and major behavioral reactions. Nevertheless, service efforts are focused on addressing all the causal factors. Agencies tend to "go it alone" and to become insular, protective, and competitive in a nonproductive manner.

It is necessary to find out what does and does not work for the runaways. This requires an open review of the results of the agencies' efforts and the sharing of this information among the agencies. Such review is necessary at all levels of public, private, and voluntary efforts.

Once the review is completed, the desired outcomes can be described. Differences in efforts can be tabulated, similarities discovered, and gaps identified. From this point, negotiated, cooperative efforts can be developed to reduce the youths' need to run from their homes.

The accounts of the runaways who participated in our study indicate that interagency coordination needs to meet six priorities:

- First and foremost, runaways need safe, alternative residential environments.
- Second, they need immediate relief from the stress they experience. This relief must counter the euphoria they seek via drugs and alcohol.
- Third, runaway youths need an economic base to offset their reliance on prostitution and criminal activities for immediate financial support and peer recognition.
- Fourth, they need alternative education in order to achieve economic independence.
- Fifth, the runaways need multidimensional treatment for their many manifestations of chronic post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).
- Sixth, law-enforcement professionals need to work closely with the social services to create and implement intervention procedures designed to provide a proactive buffer by interdicting the adults who prey on youths. *Note*: This approach does not necessarily require utilizing secure detention of the youth.

For those runaways who suffer parental abuse, efforts must be made to address the abuse and provide support services to them and to their families. This support includes shelters for the youths as well as treatment for the abusing adults. In order to provide immediate strategies for intervention, agencies must be encouraged to participate in efforts of interagency cooperation and evaluation.

### Research and Program Evaluation

Large population studies as well as longitudinal studies are needed to explore the many factors that may impede the development of positive family structures. These studies range from the impact of family economics to the effect of violence as portrayed in the media. In addition, it is necessary that epidemiological and demographic studies on family violence and runaway behavior be conducted. The long-term biopsychosocial effects of trauma and neglect as they relate to running away also require additional examination.

Collaborative efforts to explore the extent of contributing variables as well as the runaway experience itself need to be continued. In particular, researchers must continually consult the youths and the families themselves for accounts of their experiences. It is from

these individuals that we gain our greatest insights into what it takes to survive overwhelmingly negative odds to become committed, responsible members of society.

Program evaluation has at its heart the discovery of what works with whom and at what point the youth disrupts the cycle of running. Centralized data analysis centers would help greatly in allowing small agencies a systematic review of their efforts without financially impacting service efforts.

Attitude is another important aspect of program evaluation. Because service agencies are caught in a struggle for existence, they may emphasize positive reports that often minimize details that would answer critical and ultimately cost-saving questions: Who benefits most from the program? Might the program be appropriate for a group that is not presently being considered? Consequently, attitudes of openness are needed, attitudes that develop only when agencies feel they can trust evaluation review procedures and interpretation of their reported efforts.

In all areas of research and evaluation, every effort has to be made to foster collaboration and cooperation. The delivery system—public, private, and voluntary—needs to work closely with the academic research and training centers. In addition, researchers in the areas of law-enforcement, government policy, and economics studies as well as in the traditional areas of the service professions and social research groups must coordinate their efforts.

In summary, a positive future for the runaway youth requires public recognition that runaway behavior represents more than the reaction of wayward youths. The children and adolescents who attempt to find sanctuary on the streets are tomorrow's statistics on death, mental illness, or criminal behavior. We as a society must be mindful that runaway behavior patterns reflect complex issues not easily recognized.

A first in this effort is to recognize our abilities and to strive to maintain a spirit of cooperation, tolerance, and positive energy. We can then move to educate ourselves about the needs of the runaways and their families.

# 6. A Message for Parents

Running away can be a frightening experience—for both the child and the parents. Your child becomes vulnerable as soon as he or she leaves home—potentially falling victim to drugs, drinking, crime, sexual exploitation, child pornography, or child prostitution. In the face of this, many parents may feel guilty or depressed . . . or even paralyzed by fear.

It is important for parents to remain calm and rational when they discover that their child has run away. Do not panic or lose sight of the immediate task at hand—to locate the runaway and return him or her safely home.

### If Your Child Runs Away

The first 48 hours following the runaway are the most important in locating the child. Many runaway children return home during this 48-hour period. To help locate your runaway child, follow these steps immediately:

1. Check with your child's friends, school, neighbors, relatives, or anyone else who may know of your child's whereabouts. Ask them to notify you if they hear from the child.
2. Report the runaway to the local police or sheriff's department. Have an officer respond to your home to take the report.
3. Write down the officer's name, badge number, telephone number, and the police report number. Find out from the officer who will follow up the initial investigation. *Remember*: Keep a notebook and record all information on the investigation.
4. Provide the police with a recent photo of your child.
5. Make sure your police department enters your child's name and description into the National Crime Information Center (NCIC) computer. This information will *not* give your child a police record, and it may aid in his or her safe return.
6. If your state has a clearinghouse on missing children, make sure that the police pass on the necessary information about your child to the clearinghouse.
7. If your local police will not enter your child into the NCIC computer, the FBI will. The Missing Children Act of 1982 mandates this. Contact your nearest FBI field

office for help. *Remember*: No matter what you have been told, there is no law requiring a waiting period for reporting the child missing to the police or for entry into NCIC. Some police department procedures may still involve a waiting period; therefore, you may have to go to the FBI yourself to get your child entered in NCIC.

8. Call or check several local spots that your child may frequent, and check with area hospitals and treatment centers. If your child was employed, call the employer or coworkers.

9. If you have not done so, contact the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children at 1-800-843-5678.

10. Call your local runaway hotline (if there is one) as well as the National Runaway Switchboard at 1-800-621-4000. Ask if your child has left a message, and leave a message for him or her. You may wish to contact the Runaway Hotline at 1-800-231-6946 or Home Run at 1-800-647-7968. Also contact local runaway shelters and those in adjoining states. There are over 400 runaway shelters throughout the country, and they will be able to give you assistance and advice.

11. Make fingerprints and dental records available to the police. This information may need to be added to the existing NCIC entry.

12. Using the poster format on page 45, have posters or fliers made of your child. Place them in store windows, and distribute them to truck stops, youth-oriented businesses, hospitals, treatment centers, and law-enforcement agencies.

## When Your Child Returns Home

When your child is recovered or returns home, make sure to show love and concern for his or her safety—*not* anger or fear. If you react angrily, your child may feel unwanted and unloved and may run away again. Make sure that your child understands that you care about what happens to him or her.

Promptly notify the police, state clearinghouse, the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, the National Runaway Switchboard, or anyone else who may have assisted you.

If your child has been away for an extended period of time, a complete medical examination should be made when he or she returns home, including tests for sexually transmitted diseases.

Most important, when your child returns, try to resolve the problems in your family that prompted your child to leave home in the first place. In general, children run away because of problems or stresses in the family or at home—such as divorce, remarriage, alcoholism, or physical or sexual abuse.

If you are unable to deal with the family problems effectively, seek the assistance of a trained counselor or professional. Parents can contact the local Department of Social Services, Family Services, or other public or private agencies that help families. Members of the clergy, school personnel, or the law-enforcement community can also direct you to available services and resources.

It may be necessary for your child to go to a temporary residence or runaway shelter while the family works toward resolving its problems. A trained counselor can help you make this decision.

### Preparation . . . Just in Case

There are several ways that parents can be prepared in the event that their child runs away. While some of these measures may be more appropriate for a younger child, they all provide valuable information to aid in the quick recovery of a runaway:

1. Keep a complete written description of your child, including hair and eye color, height, weight, date of birth, and specific physical attributes.
2. Take color photographs of your child every six months. Head and shoulder portraits from different angles, such as those taken by school photographers, are preferable.
3. Make sure your dentist prepares full dental charts on your child and updates them with each exam. If you move, get a copy of these dental records to keep in your files until a new dentist is found.
4. Find out from your doctor where your child's medical records are located. All permanent scars, birthmarks, broken bones, and medical needs should be recorded.
5. Arrange with your local police department to have your child fingerprinted. The police department will give you the fingerprint card. They will *not* keep a record of your child's prints.

### Warning Signs of Running Away

Warning signs that may indicate that your child is thinking about leaving home include the following:

- Problems in school, such as truancy, a drop in grades, or a sudden lack of interest
- Sudden and abnormal changes in mood, behavior, or habits
- Increased isolation and withdrawal from friends and family
- Increased incidence of rebellion and rule breaking
- Violent displays of temper
- Family crisis, such as death, divorce, or remarriage
- Accumulation of money and possessions
- Talk about running away or of friends running away
- Severe depression, anxiety, or fear
- Tendency toward drinking or taking drugs
- Sudden change in friends or companions

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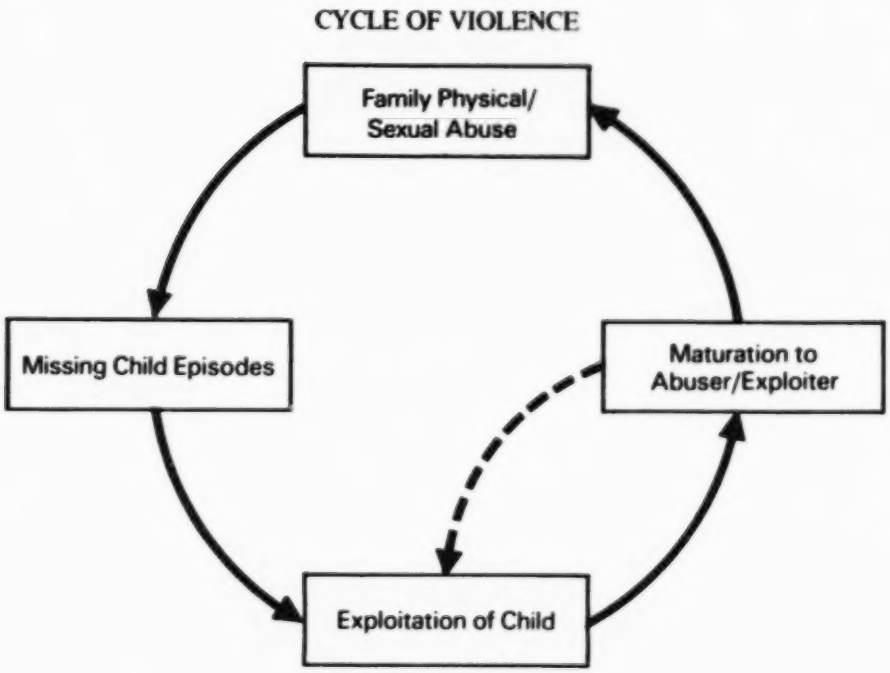
# Appendix 1


CYCLE OF VIOLENCE
Family Physical/
Sexual Abuse
Maturation to
Abuser/Exploiter
Exploitation of Child
Missing Child Episodes

# Appendix 2

## SEXUAL VICTIMIZATION OF CHILDREN

| I<br>*Sexually Abused Children* | II<br>*Sexually Exploited Children* | III<br>*Missing Children* |
|---|---|---|
| **A. Victims**<br>1. Extent and effect<br>(a) girls/boys<br>2. Indicators<br>3. Investigative difficulties<br>**B. Victim/Offender**<br>1. Relationship<br>(a) stranger<br>(b) relative<br>(c) acquaintance<br>2. Violence<br>3. Seduction process<br>**C. Offenders**<br>1. Situational<br>(a) regressed<br>(b) morally indiscriminate<br>(c) sexually indiscriminate<br>(d) inadequate<br>2. Preferential (pedophile)<br>(a) seduction<br>(b) introvert<br>(c) sadistic | **A. Pornography**<br>1. Commercial/homemade<br>2. Technical/simulated<br>3. Child erotica<br>4. Collection<br>(a) fantasy<br>(b) validation<br>(c) souvenir<br>**B. Sex Rings**<br>1. Ongoing access<br>2. Offender-victim bond<br>3. Types<br>(a) solo<br>(b) transition<br>(c) syndicated<br>**C. Prostitution**<br>1. Runaways<br>2. Gender and age<br>3. Life span<br>4. Customers<br>(a) situational<br>(b) preferential | **A. Runaways (homeless)**<br>1. Thrown away/lured away<br>2. From abuse (sexual?)<br>3. To exploitation (sexual?)<br>**B. Lost/Injured**<br>**C. Parental Abduction**<br>1. Mother/father(?)<br>2. Good/bad parent (?)<br>3. UFAP<br>**D. Abduction**<br>1. Emotionally disturbed<br>2. Profit<br>3. Ransom<br>4. Sexual<br>(a) keep<br>(b) return<br>(c) discard<br>(d) kill<br>5. Child killer<br>(a) organized<br>(b) disorganized<br>(c) parent |

A child victimization case may be categorized by the juvenile justice system in any of the three ways described above. Runaways may enter the social service system in any of the three categories. Table by Kenneth V. Lanning, Supervisory Special Agent, Behavioral Science Unit, Federal Bureau of Investigation.

# Appendix 3

## PATHS AND PATTERNS OF RUNAWAY YOUTHS

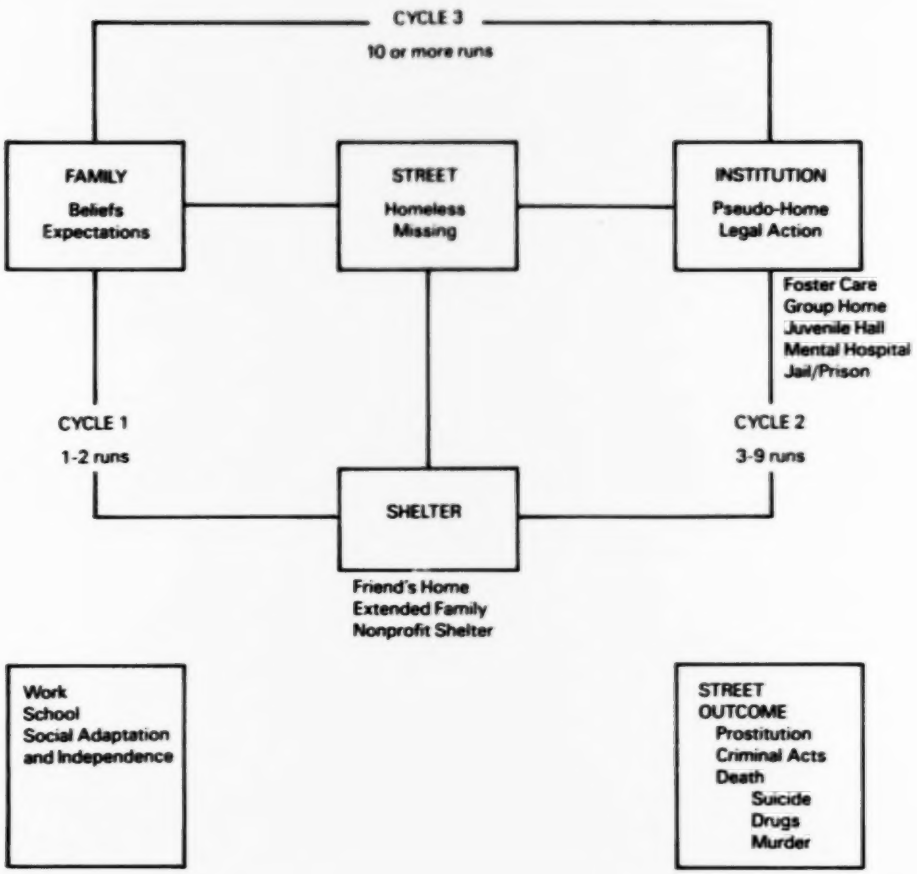



Chart by Dr. Ann W. Burgess, van Ameringen Professor of Psychiatric Mental Health Nursing, University of Pennsylvania.

# POSTER FORMAT

## MISSING

Date of Photo

Date of Photo

### NAME OF CHILD

Date of birth: Age: Height: Weight:
Color of hair: Color of eyes: Complexion:
Physical characteristics: (braces, glasses, pierced ears, scars, marks, tattoos, etc.)
Clothing description:
Circumstances of disappearance: (last seen where, with whom, hitchhiking, etc.)

### IF YOU HAVE INFORMATION, PLEASE CONTACT:

Name of police department: Police telephone number:
Officer assigned to case: Police case number:
Parents' telephone number: (optional)

Personal message to runaway: (We all love you. We want to work this out. Please call. Love, Mom and Dad.)

NATIONAL CENTER FOR MISSING & EXPLOITED CHILDREN

**NATIONAL CENTER FOR MISSING AND EXPLOITED CHILDREN**

**1-800-843-5678**

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**Appendix**

**Missing Poster Format**